

Most people are attracted to a recreation by what they visually see. If the hobby looks like it's fun to do, they will try it. In the advertising trade, it's called "eye candy."

Square dancing used to look like fun to do. Modern Western Square Dancing, now, has a big image problem because, from the viewpoint of the spectator on the sidelines, it no longer looks like fun to do.

The square dance routines that used to please audiences visually are no longer used at the average Modern Western Square Dance. When they are occasionally revived, they are poorly danced by most dancers.

20 step Grand Squares are the most glaring example, but good timing and good styling have also vanished from dancing other square dance "basics." The name of the game, now, is to get to the next waypoint any way the dancer can. The image the spectator sees is much like watching a large ant pile.

Most of the movement seems random to the spectators. Unless callers plan otherwise, it is often random. MWSDing is presently a process of following, ever-changing directions, given by a leader to a group of eight people moving around a confined geographic area. In many ways, it looks like eight people trying to navigate a miniature maze, and they keep running into each other.

Any successful recreation must appeal to a large population base or die. The recreation must have a constant input of new people. Recruiting new people is dependent on presenting an attractive product for consideration. However, any product must be accessible to the average user.

There is a large population of people who want to dance. Many dance forms are attractive to watch. However, many dance forms appear difficult to learn. Most people are afraid to try any kind of dancing for fear of embarrassing themselves in public. They want to look good for the audience.

Traditional square dancing and contra dancing look easy to learn. All you have to be able to do is walk. Beginner Dance Parties look like dancing anyone could do. Most of their dance leaders use only the most simple "basics."

Square Dancing, at the beginner party level, is probably the most accessible form of any dance form if presented correctly. That's because it's a team dance format. It's difficult not to be able to Circle Left and Circle Right if you are holding hands with other people in a circle. It's also easy to learn "basics" such as Forward and Back, Arm Turns, Stars, and Promenade. I've entertained many groups of beginner dancers for over two hours using these five "basics."

Beginner Dance Parties have remained popular with the public because anyone can enjoy a Beginner Dance Party with no prior dancing experience. There are no lessons. New dancers just need to be willing to get out on the dance floor and move to the music.

Square Dancing is a dance of the hands and not of the feet. It's an excellent form of dancing for people who learn visually. At the beginner party dance level, almost every movement can be learned by watching someone else do it. When I do beginner dance parties, I dance with the people. What I do is as important as what I say.

Traditional Square Dancing has survived mainly because almost every dance is walked-thru before it is danced. The other critical element is the dance sequence repeats rather than being different each time. That is an essential difference between Traditional and Modern Western Square Dancing.

In general, people are more comfortable with dance routines than with extemporaneous directions provided by some leader. Most dancers want a predictable pattern to follow. It is also true in other forms of dancing. Almost any other form of dancing is composed of repeating movement patterns.

Modern Western Square Dancing has evolved away from all the above attributes. Presently, callers take great pride in being able to move dancers around with short commands with very detailed definitions. Unfortunately, this type of “dancing” is only popular with a tiny segment of the general population.

Each one of these goals of MWSDing, in the present form, contributes to the unattractive visual picture the spectator sees. So, as MWSDing continues to evolve the prospective pool of recruits will get smaller and smaller.

Can this be changed? Sure it can. We have the “basics” to create beautiful movement patterns that will appeal to spectators. We teach many of them during the first few square dance lessons and then abandon them. Many callers no longer have any idea how to match timing with music correctly. Most callers can learn that skill. CALLERLAB has excellent publications that show good styling. There is knowledge available from older callers that still know how to dance with good styling. We need callers that are willing to teach these skills and dancers that want to learn how.